The Swan Princess 4: Back to the Throne

by JC

PROLOGUE

On a cold, December night, a terrible storm passed through Chamburg, and although most of the kingdom was safe in their beds, not everyone was sleeping through the tempest…

“Goodnight Alex,” whispered King Derek as he affectionately tucked in his newborn daughter. “Derek, do you think she’ll be alright in this storm?” asked Odette, Derek’s beautiful queen. “Odette, I definitely believe Alex will be just fine, don’t worry so much.” Derek had always been the more laid-back of the couple, if only to keep Odette calm. “I know I shouldn’t be so nervous, but after Rothbart…” “Rothbart’s gone,” Derek interrupted, “and he, Clauvius, and Zelda are not coming back. They won’t hurt anyone anymore.”

Unfortunately for Derek, and the entire kingdom, he was wrong. After he and Odette went to bed the wind suddenly kicked up, especially around the castle’s nursery. A crash of thunder, a crack of lightning, the sound of broken glass, and a baby’s cry did not deter the evil sorceress, Zelda from her goal. “With you gone,” she hissed, “Your foolish parents will be reduced to the sniveling wretches they truly are, giving me the time I need to redevelop the Forbidden Arts!” After a wild cackle, covered by the ferocity of the storm, now louder because of the shattered window, the kingdom’s most prized treasure, its only heir, was gone.

*****17 YEARS LATER*****

Alex skillfully sprinted through the woods, dodging every protruding root and low hanging branch, dark brown hair flying wildly behind her, as she had done what seemed like a thousand times before. It was even harder tonight, as there was no moon. “Great,” she thought, “I’ll have to spout wings and fly if I ever want to get back to that pit of an orphanage I live in before dawn.” Alexandra was tough, but no one wanted to tangle with the orphanage’s director, Dame Agatha. Finally, the rundown building was in sight, and Alex knew she was home free.

Silently, like a cat she opened the window to her dorm room, and slid into her creaky bed. “Where were you?” asked a familiar voice. “Shhh, Lila!” ordered Alex. “I was hiding my money. I work hard for it and Agatha isn’t getting a cent of it.” “Keep it down you two!” called another voice. “Jane’s right, Lila,” said Alex, “Goodnight.”

Chapter One

Somehow Alex knew there would be trouble the next day. She’d never gotten caught after sneaking out, but today was going to be bad.

After Dame Agatha marched them out of bed and into the cafeteria, she made an announcement. Of course, morning announcements always started with a force “Good morning Dame Agatha” from the children. Agatha called out, “Quiet down you vermin! I have an announcement! But first… Good morning children.” She spoke the last word with a sickly sweetness that made Alex ill. “Good morning Dame Agatha,” chorused the children, including Alex, who was at first too proud to be turned into a mindless drone. After years of punishment, she called back the greeting, often wanting to wash her mouth out with soap after doing so.

“As you all know,” Agatha began, eyeing Alex, “it’s that glorious time of year when the oldest one of you gets kicked out on your backside, and I think we all know who it will be this year.” Alex knew it had been coming for awhile. Every year the oldest “child” was sent away to an arranged job, or in some cases marriage, set up by Dame Agatha. Last year Alex’s best friend left and asked her to keep an eye on the other orphans. She had done so faithfully, and although she hated the orphanage and Dame Agatha, she knew she would miss her friends.

She gathered her belongings, which consisted of the clothes on her back, a necklace no one could seem to take off (which was fine with Alex), and a few coins she kept under her bed. Finally it was time to go, and having said all her “good byes,” she felt a pang of sadness that reminded her of what she was leaving behind. “Go to the road, and turn left. You’ll have a job as a fish monger.” Alex grimaced, but Agatha didn’t see it. Alex loathed the smell of fish, fresh or otherwise, and having a job as a fish monger was going to be an incredibly miserable experience.

Alex walked down the dirty street, sometimes pausing for a moment just to think. *“Wait a minute,”* she thought, *“I don’t have to do anything Agatha says. I can go wherever I want. Not that there are a whole lot of places I can go, but there is no way I’m going to sell fish for a living.”* She them changed her direction, heading to the hiding place where she kept her money.

After a few short minutes Alex arrived at the farm where she kept her money. *“This place looks so much different at night,”* she thought. She found the barn and climbed up the loft just to see the view. She had done this many times before, and had been caught only once. Fortunately, the barn’s kind owner smiled at her and told her about the place. He was the only one else in the world that knew she visited the farm.

Finally, after staring down on the field, like a cat watching a mouse, she climbed down the rickety ladder and headed back outside. She walked along the side of the barn to a wood stack that hadn’t been touched in months. She moved a piece of wood that lay on the ground, and began to dig. The hole she used wasn’t deep, and she soon found the gold and silver coins she had earned by making various household goods. From quilts to bows and arrows, she could make anything out of anything.

She then went to the woods where she hid her own bow and arrows. Alex grabbed the bow first and admired its fine curve and the satisfying twang of the string when she pulled it. She then pulled out the quiver, which she had traded for a blanket a few weeks before. She removed one of the arrows and felt its arrow head. Just by touching it, Alex nearly pricked her finger. She smiled happily and got up. “Now what?” she wondered. “Go to the road and turn left!” she cackled. Her impression of the orphanage director made many others laugh and even now it cheered her up.

She began to walk and again she realized she truly did have no place to go. The only place she could go was the fish seller’s stall at the market, and she had already made up her mind about that. When Alex made up her mind, nothing could change it. “Oh come on,” she scolded herself. *“All my life I’ve been waiting to get out of that pit of an orphanage and be on my own. Now I am and I don’t know what to do with myself. Ridiculous.”* After cursing and scolding herself for a few more minutes, she headed off to a nearby town.

Chapter 2

When Alex reached the town outside of Swan Lake, Chamburg’s capitol, she was nearly knocked over by just the sight of people hustling and bustling about. There were street performers, and stall keepers running around. Merchants were calling out their wares, children laughing and playing, women shopping, and men talking about the news f the day. Even the smell of the city was overwhelming to Alex. She could smell bread baking, different colognes and perfumes, sweat, and, though it was unwelcome in her revelry, horse manure. The orphanage wasn’t even close to this. Everybody was busy talking or working. The only people who seemed to be standing still were a few armed guards that dotted some of the street corners.

Alex walked ahead although she was a little apprehensive because of the noise. That is until she realized she actually fit in with in the chaos. She even felt confident after walking for a few minutes.

As she walked by people began calling at her. She thought they were rude catcalls until she actually started to listen to them. They were just salesmen, she realized, wanting her to buy something. “Jewelry for the young miss!” they called. “Fresh fruit ma’am!” “Clothing for the young lady!” Alex, unsure of how to react, smiled, waved, and walked on. Finally, she became hungry and bought a small loaf of bread with the money she saved up.

Alex had eaten a good deal of the bread when someone bumped into her. She had been so deep in thought that she dropped the remaining bread when she was bumped into. “Oh no! I’m sorry,” she said. “Oh please don’t be! It was my fault,” said an apologetic young man’s voice. “Forgive me for my clumsiness. I should have been paying more attention. Would you like me to buy more bread?” “Oh no there’s no need to,” Alex answered, politely refusing his kindness. “I was almost done anyway.” “if there’s anything I can do please tell me!” She couldn’t believe how guilty this person was, just for doing something so normal. “Well you can calm down first,” she answered, “and don’t worry about the bread.” “Sorry,” he apologized again. “I just…er… wasn’t paying attention. Sorry.”

At that moment, Alex could see the young man’s face. He had intense dark brown eyes; the total opposite to her grey blue ones. His face was very handsome, with features that were nearly perfect, despite the small amount of sweat on his face. His shoulder length hair was coal black, much darker than hers or anyone else she’d ever known.

Although their facial features were different, Alex felt slightly embarrassed. She noticed they were dressed almost exactly the same. They both wore black pants. (Alex abhorred dresses. She couldn’t count the number of times she’d seen Dame Agatha fall on her face because of her unnecessary skirts.) They wore boots that reached about two inches below the knees, his brown, hers faded and grey. The only real difference was the colors of their shirts; his was a dark blue, hers white.

Alex was snapped out of her thoughts when he spoke again. “Name is Matthew Steele,” he said, “and I hope you let me make this up to you. Please tell me your name.” “My name is Alexandra, but you can call me Alex for short.” Matthew smiled. “I like that,” Matthew said. “Would you like to come with me to grab a bite to eat?” Alex smiled politely. “Sure,” she answered.

Matthew led Alex down the street a little ways until they reached an inviting looking little inn. “The Twilight Inn,” Alex read aloud before they walked in. Matthew smiled as he opened the door for Alex. “This place makes the best soup,” he told her. “You’re going to like it here.” They sat down and a minute later, an exhausted looking serving girl walked to their table. “Can I help you?” she asked, smiling, though it was apparent that the inn was a little short-handed. “We’ll just have some soup,” Matthew answered. “The usual hmmm?” the serving girl asked. “I take it you’ve been here a few times?” Alex assumed. “Yes a few times,” Matthew replied, again smiling. “So tell me about yourself.” “What do you want to know?” Alex asked.

“I don’t know, just a bit about you.”

“Oh,” she said. After a minute of thought, Alex began telling a lot about herself. She told about her experiences in the orphanage, about Dame Agatha, and about sneaking off at night. She couldn’t believe she was telling so much about herself to this person she had only just met.

When she finished, Alex looked at Matthew, wondering what he thought about her strange story. “Clearly,” he said, “no one has ever treated you with any kind of love or kindness that everyone should have. Alex nodded in agreement. “It was hard at first, but eventually I could just… you know… block out the pain.”

“It’s sad how people treat each other.”

Again Alex nodded in agreement. After a moment of silent reflection, she finally asked, “So what about you? Where did you grow up?”

“I grew up in an entirely situation, I’m afraid. My father is Lord Peter Steele; he has a castle west of here.” Matthew looked down regretfully. “You don’t have to be sorry or ashamed about where you came from,” Alex said, “Why are you here if your father’s castle isn’t?” “I’m training to be a knight,” Matthew said. “You see, my brother, Peter Steele the II was a king’s knight along time ago. He betrayed King Derek and left him to die at the hands of three ogres.” As Matthew talked about his brother, Alex could here the shame and malice behind every word. “I want to show everyone that my family is not just a bunch of traitors,” he said.

Alex thought a moment a said, “I don’t think you should have to prove that you’re a loyal person. You are who you choose to be, you’re not your father or your brother. You’re just you.” Matthew’s reply was silence at first. “A lot of people have said that. I wish that I didn’t feel like I have to repent for something my brother did.” Matthew shook his head in sorrow. “In any event, I am a royal squire.” Alex smiled, “So your full title is ‘Squire Matthew Steele?’”

They continued to talk for a while until Matthew looked out the window. “I’m sorry Alex, but it’s late and I should go.” “And I have to find a place to stay tonight,” Alex agreed. “I think the owner here needs another serving girl,” Matthew offered. “He’s a nice person, I’ve no doubt he’ll let you stay if you help him out here.” “I think I’ll take your advice, thank you.” “I’ll drop in tomorrow to see how you’re doing,” he promised. “Thank you so much for everything,” Alex said gratefully, “and I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

Chapter 3

Alex easily got the job at the inn. The owner was so happy, he threw his arms around Alex and didn’t let go for a really long time. Matthew kept his promise, and dropped by the next day and the day after. After a few weeks, this became routine, Alex working, and Matthew spending all his free time at the inn. Little did either of them know, things were about to take a turn.

One morning Matthew walked into the inn, looking somewhat melancholy. Alex, who had just finished serving the breakfast rush, sat beside him and sighed, “I love my job, but it can be really tiring.” Matthew didn’t answer, when Alex looked at him, she could see the sadness in his eyes, and she was worried. “What’s wrong?” she asked. When Matthew turned to look at her, his eyes were bleak and miserable and it alarmed Alex.

“I have to leave in three days,” he finally answered. “The King wants me to accompany him to Lincolnshire.” “That’s great,” Alex said, surprising him. “I guess you’re moving up.” “Yeah,” he agreed, “but I don’t know how long I’ll in Lincolnshire and I really don’t want to leave you here alone.”

Alex smiled soothingly. “I can take care of myself you know. You go, and try to enjoy it.” “Thanks Alex, you’re really good to me.”

That night Alex had a strange dream. She was standing in a huge room, fancier than she’d ever seen. She could see the figures of two people, blurry at first, but becoming clearer. It was a man and a woman, they looked so familiar, but Alex was sure she hadn’t seen them. The man was tall, with brown hair and grey blue eyes. He looked very kind, with eyes that seemed to smile, although his mouth was speaking. The woman was also very kind looking. She had long blonde hair and blue eyes as well, though hers were a different shade than the man’s. She looked at the man and smiled as he spoke. Alex also noticed a baby’s crib next to the woman. Though she desperately wanted to see the crib she found she couldn’t walk. She tried to speak but nothing came out.

Finally a mirror appeared out of thin air and floated just above the two people. She could see herself in it, and was shocked at what she became aware of. Her eyes and hair were the same color as the man’s, and her face was nearly identical to the woman’s. “Are they my real parents?” she wondered. Suddenly, she woke up, moisture built up in her eyes and streaming down her face.

Chapter 4

Three days later it was time for Matthew to leave. Alex felt the same pang of sorrow that she felt when she left the orphanage, but she took comfort knowing that she’d see him again. “I promise I’ll be back as soon as possible,” Matthew said. “I’m going to miss you a lot.” Alex smiled. Over the past few weeks, she and Matthew had become extremely close.

As Matthew saddled up, finally ready to leave, Alex wished him good luck. “As If I need luck,” he joked. Alex rolled her eyes. “Sure…”

Matthew looked at her with an expression that surprised Alex. “What’s that supposed to mean? You don’t think I can make it?” Alex was confused and annoyed, “I didn’t say you couldn’t do it. It was a small joke. Calm down.” “Small jokes amuse small minds I guess,” he muttered. Now Alex was exceptionally irritated. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked as if she didn’t already know the answer to that question. “Small joke,” he retorted curtly. “You know,” she replied, “I’m starting to be glad you’re leaving.” She regretted this the moment she said it. However the anger returned when she heard Matthew’s reply. “Good. I glad I’m going! Bye!”

A few hours later, Alex was cleaning dishes at the inn trying in vain to forget about Matthew. She scrubbed the dishes furiously until Sloane, the inn’s owner walked up behind her. “Alex,” he said, startling her, “something has upset you. You shouldn’t be worrying about dishes.”

“I’m just trying to keep my mind off of Matthew,” she replied. Sloane became even more concerned, “What happened?” he asked.

Alex sighed and told him about her argument with Matthew. When she finished, Sloane thought a moment and said, “Well go get him! It’s exceedingly obvious that you regret your fight with Matthew. Go find him and make amends!” “Why should I apologize?” she asked, now annoyed at Sloane. “It was his bad attitude that started this whole thing!” Sloane replied, “And I’d bet anything he’s just as regretful as you are.” “Alright I’ll go.” Sloane smiled, “Use my horse, the black one, he’s the fastest.”

Alex saddled up and rode as fast as she could. She knew Matthew and the king wouldn’t be too far, but, despite herself, she wanted to apologize as soon as possible. She flew out of the town and through the woods at an incredible speed.

Finally she caught up, and Matthew and the king were in sight. She began to call out, “Matthew, Matthew wait!” Matthew confused, turned around to face whoever was calling him. When he saw that it was Alex he quickly asked, “May I have a moment, Sir?” “Of course,” replied the kind King Derek. Matthew dismounted and waited for Alex to catch up.

Alex got off the horse while it was still moving and nearly fell over. Luckily, Matthew was right there to catch her. “What’s wrong?” he asked urgently. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry,” she replied. “No,” he said, “I’m the one that should apologize, it was my fault. I was having a bad morning and I took it out on you. For that, I’m so very sorry.”

Matthew held Alex close for a long time. At last she pulled away and said, “I shouldn’t have pushed you. I’m sorry for that…” Her voice faltered on the last word, but the next thing she said came out loud and clear. “Ogres!” Sure enough, three ogres were surrounding them on all sides. In one swift motion Alex ran up to the king, pulled his sword out of its sheath, turned, and killed an ogre that would have surly killed the king if she hadn’t acted so quickly. She then ran over to where she was standing and began fighting a much bigger ogre. Matthew, who was fighting the third ogre, could see Alex struggle with the ogre she was fighting. Suddenly, the ogre snapped his hand out, grabbed her neck and began to strangle her, lifting her off the ground with one powerful arm.

“No!” he yelled, and he thrust the end of his sword into his opponent. Matthew ran over the ogre that Alex was fighting and killed it with one swing of his sword. Alex dropped to the ground in a heap, but was able to get up without help. “Thanks,” she rasped.

After a few minutes of catching her breath, and insisting that she was unharmed, she stood up and walked over to King Derek. “I’m very sorry about grabbing your sword like that,” she said apologetically. “It’s all right. If you hadn’t done that I’d be a goner,” he replied gratefully. “What is your name?” Alex studied him for a moment. She felt as if she’d seen him before but did not recognize from where. “My name is Alex,” she answered.

Suddenly, Alex realized that something was missing. Instinctively, her hands flew up to the back of her neck, where the locket’s clasp was usually hanging. “My necklace!” she yelled. She immediately hit the ground and began searching on all fours. Matthew and King Derek quickly followed suite. Finally, Matthew exclaimed, “I’ve got it!” “I’m so glad you found it. Can you help me put it back on?” “Sure,” Matthew replied.

Alex held her hair out of the way as Matthew tried to fasten the necklace’s golden clasp. “Alex I think that ogre might have broken it when he grabbed you by the neck,” he said, somewhat frustrated at the clasp. “Oh no! Really?” Alex said. The necklace was of course, extremely important to her, and she didn’t have the money to fix it. “Maybe I could try,” Derek offered. “Let me see.” Matthew willingly handed the necklace over. Derek carefully examined the necklace and asked, “Where did you get this?” His voice was somewhat shaky and nervous, and Alex was alarmed. “I don’t know… I’ve been having it for as long as I could remember.”

“Have you tried to open it?” he asked. “No,” she answered, “it’s stuck.” Derek began to fiddle with the necklace and a few seconds later it was open and there were tears in his eyes. “What’s wrong sir?” Matthew asked. “Seventeen years ago I gave this necklace to my baby daughter, Alex. I even had a wizard put a spell on it so that it couldn’t be stolen. Alex, how old are you?”

Alex’s voice was shaky as she answered, “Se- Seventeen.” “Look here.” Derek held the locket up so that Alex could see it. On the inside, *“From your loving parents, Derek and Odette”* Alex looked from the locket to Derek in disbelief. “All this time… it’s been right under my nose, the answer’s been right here al along.”

Derek had all the proof he needed. He threw his arms around Alex and hugged her far a while. “I’ve been wondering, for seventeen long years, what’s happened to my daughter. I’m so glad we found each other. Alex had to choke back tears as she said in disbelief, “Father! I finally know who my parents are!”

After a few more minutes, Alex rubbed her eyes to clear her joyous tears away. Finally, she was able to control her breathing. “Come on,” Derek said, “let’s get you back home.” “What about your trip?” Alex asked. “You know,” he replied “some things are more important.”

Matthew, Alex, who was actually Princess Alexandra and King Derek, rode to the castle as fast as the horses would carry them. The woods flew by in a blur, and the town was nothing more than a smudge. The three of them rode through the castle’s huge gatehouse. They dismounted and walked quickly into the great hall. “Rogers,” Derek called to his friend and councilor, “please get Odette. I have someone you both need to meet."

It didn’t take long for Odette to meet them in the front hall. She nearly flew down the marble stairs, in a hurry to see why her husband was home only a few hours after he left. She and Rogers both reached the landing at the same time, but before Rogers could ask who their visitor was, Odette cut him off. “Derek what’s wrong? Why are you back so early?” Derek merely smiled and stepped aside, revealing Alex, who was right behind him.

Odette stared for a moment, astounded. The quiet lasted for a while as mother and daughter studied each other. At last, the silence was broken when Derek needlessly introduced Alex. “Odette, this is our daughter,” he said. “I don’t believe it,” Odette stammered out at last. Tears of pure joy flowed out of her eyes as Alex spoke, “Yes it’s me.” She held out the now broken necklace for Odette to see.

Odette didn’t really need the necklace as proof. She knew the second she looked at Alex, who she was. “Seventeen years…” she said quietly as she walked over to hug Alex. “I’ll never let you out of my sight again,” Odette half joked, half promised. Alex was amazed. *“This morning,”* she thought, *“I was an orphan, now I’m a princess. Amazing how things change.”*

Alex quit her job at the inn, although she would miss Sloane, the one person who treated her like a valuable member of society. She moved into the castle at Swan Lake, and resolved to spend her time with her family and friends. She even met Puffin, Jean Bob, and Speed, who were her parents’ best friends in the animal kingdom. Everywhere she went, people smiled at her and that felt wonderful.

Alex even changed on the inside as well. The only person she really cared about was Matthew (who she now called Matt because he thought, “It’s too much of a mouthful!”) Now, she rarely ever left her mother’s side and she never ever felt alone.

The hole in her heart that she never knew about filled in as she spent more and more time with them.

But like her parents, trouble always finds her, and peace is always temporary…

One afternoon she was in her favorite room, the library. It was an absolutely huge room where the best and rarest books were kept. Once, the first time she went there, she’d gotten lost among all the books. That day she was just browsing, but she found something she’d never expect to find in a library.

She was wandering along the far western wall, where most of the older books were kept. Suddenly she stumbled on a pile of books that were in the middle of the aisle of books. Frustrated at her clumsiness, she got up and began to reshelf the books. When the first book was put back the shelf did something very strange.

The self receded into the floor, which seemed impossible because the floors were solid stone. When the shelf was set in its new, lower position, a hallway was revealed. Alex gasped at her discovery. The hallway, almost entirely covered with cobwebs, was dark and appeared to reach about a hundred feet in front of her.

Alex, bewildered, but curious, pulled a torch off the wall and walked into the void. She walked until she came into a large chamber. In the middle of the chamber was a stone table, and as she approached it, she could read the words; “The Guardian Sword, Enemy of the Forbidden Arts.”

“Forbidden Arts?” she wondered. She scanned the table, but could see no signs of the sword. She then swiped her hand across the table. “Of course,” she thought, “There’s so much dust down here that the sword got buried.”

Alex put the torch on the table and carefully lifted the weapon, expecting a heavy piece of steel. When she held the ancient sword by its hilt, it was light and comfortable in her untrained hands. She swung it around expertly, although her father was still giving her lessons on how to use his sword.

She brought it to her father, who was also browsing for something to read, and asked, “Dad, do you know anything about this?” After looking at the sword in her hands he replied, “No, I’ve never seen it before. Can I hold it?” He reached out one hand for the sword, seeing how easily Alex held it, although she sometimes struggled under the weight of his sword. She handed to him, and when she did he nearly fell over because of the unbalanced weight in his extended hand. “It’s heavy!” he exclaimed, surprised. “No it’s not,” Alex said, “I can hold it easily.” “Hmmm… Well, why don’t you hang on to it? This is a rare sword and I wouldn’t want it in anyone else’s care other than yours.” Derek smiled at his daughter, who grinned back. “Thanks Dad.”

Alex took the beautiful old sword up to her room and polished it. It gleamed brilliantly in the afternoon light. She hung it up on two pegs she hammered into the wall. She then heard a knock at the door. “Alex it’s me,” her mother called. Alex tossed the filthy rag she used on her desk and called back, “Come in!” Odette opened the door and strolled in. “Alex,” she began, “Your father said you found something interesting in the library?”

“Yeah, I did actually.” She took the sword down off its pegs. “Have a look. I have no idea how old it is, but look at the detail on the pommel. And it’s sharp too! I don’t think it’s been used in years.” She looked up at her mother, who knew only the bare minimum about any type of weaponry. Alex smiled, “I’m boring you, aren’t I?” “It’s not your fault. I never took the time to learn anything about swords,” Odette replied, smiling. “Oh well,” Alex said. “There is something I want to ask you though.”

“Alright go ahead.”

Alex proceeded with caution. “What are the Forbidden Arts?” Odette gasped and Alex immediately became worried. “Who told you about that?” Odette asked, in the calmest voice she could manage, though her voice was still shaky. “When I found the sword, it was on a stone table. Someone inscribed; “The Guardian Sword, enemy of the Forbidden Arts.” Odette sighed, “I suppose you have a right to know.”

They both sat down on the bed as Odette explained all she knew about the Forbidden Arts, leaving out the night when Alex was kidnapped. When she finished Alex whistled. “Wow,” was all she could say. “Come on Alex,” Odette said, relieved to change the subject. “It’s time for dinner”

At dinner, Derek told Alex he was leaving in the morning to go to Lincolnshire. “I owe them a visit,” he said.

Chapter 6

The next morning Derek left for the week and Alex and Odette spent a pleasant five days together. On the sixth day, however, Alex woke up to something she absolutely dreaded.

Alex woke with a start after hearing her mother’s scream. She ran into her parents’ bedroom and confirmed the worst.

Odette was gone.

Gone.

The word hit Alex like a brick as she ran to read the ransom note that was left on the bed. It read:

King Derek,

Like all those years before, I’ve taken Odette. You’ve lost another family member to me already. Come to the western cliffs if you dare. I might even allow you to take her place. There is no ransom. If you don’t show up soon Odette will perish, and I'm sure she doesn’t want to die here alone…

Zelda

“No!!” Alex exclaimed. She ran back to her room and grabbed her practice sword, not bothering to grab the one she found in the library. She then ran to the stables and selected her quickest horse, a solid black charger her father had given her.

She rode straight out of the western gate when Puffin caught up with her. “Where’s the fire, princess?” he asked. “Mother’s been kidnapped,” Alex answered. Not slowing down. “My father should be leaving Lincolnshire now. Please fly to him and tell him what’s happened.” “No fear!” Puffin shouted as he flew off in a different direction.

Fortunately, Derek was coming home earlier than expected and Puffin found him quickly. When Puffin told him the news, Derek instructed, “Tell Alex to wait for me I’ll be there as soon as I can!”

Again, Puffin relayed the message. “I won’t wait!” Alex exclaimed. “Every minute I wait is another minute my mother is either suffering or dying… and I can’t even think about that. Tell my father to get to the western cliffs as soon as possible. I’ll already be there.”

Puffin flew back and Alex finally arrived at the cliffs. She spotted her mother, tied to a tree, and dismounted before the horse stopped moving. She untied Odette and said, “You need to leave. Get as far away from here as possible!” “And leave you?” Odette demanded. “I’ve lost you once before, and I won’t lose you again!”

“Please listen. Only one of us is going to get out of here alive, and I’d rather it be you.”

“Alex…” “Try to understand. I came to take your place. I don’t want anything to happen to you.” “And you think I can just sit by while you…” Odette’s voice trailed off as she looked into Alex’s grey- blue eyes. “You giving your life for mine isn’t exactly fair.”

“Give it up Odette,” another voice cut in, “It sounds like she’s ready for you to plan for the funeral.” Alex knew, immediately, who it was. “Zelda!” “The one and only!” she snickered. “You know who I am, but who are you?” “Do you honestly have no idea?” Alex asked in her defiant bravado tone. “Let me give you a hint!” Alex lunged quickly at Zelda, taking her by surprise. Unfortunately, Zelda recovered and blasted Alex with magic.

Alex pretended not to feel it. “It’s going to take a lot more than that to bring me down!” Zelda was stunned as she looked at Alex’s face. “You… you’re Alexandra!” “The one and only!” Alex shot back in a mocking tone.

Suddenly, three more blasts of magic sent Alex flying into a nearby tree. Derek and Matthew came just in time to see it and Odette was so afraid for her daughter that she screamed. Alex reached behind her neck and, just as she feared, warm blood was running down her neck. She couldn’t recuperate from the blow fast enough and was blasted again and again.

Finally it was all too much. The last blast knocked her sword out of her hand, and she sat weakly against a tree. “Any last thoughts you’d like to share?” Zelda asked knowing she’d won. Alex looked at the morning sun for what she was sure going to be the last time. “Just that this is how I want it to end.” She looked toward her stricken family and continued, “I wanted it to end like this, so that someone I love can escape. Father,” she continued, “I’m sorry for not waiting. I love you all” She fell silent for a moment. “Alright Zelda, you’ve won. Finish it.” Zelda laughed for a moment. “I have an idea,” she said, “I’m going to run you through with your own sword!”

Zelda lifted the practice sword and lifted. Before she could strike, something flew at her and landed by Alex. It was The Guardian Sword. “Alexandra,” a time and space transcending voice said, “pick up the sword and defeat Zelda!” “How can I pick up the sword when I can’t move my own arm?” “Try” the voice roared. Alex picked it up and, as if by magic, her wounds were healed. She leaped at Zelda and moved faster than she ever had before. She got struck and Zelda, who tried to parry the blow with the practice sword. The weaker practice sword was sliced in half, and Alex lifted her sword again. Zelda ran, but it was in vain. The sword enhanced every one of Alex’s senses and her power, and she marveled at it.

Seeing no possibility of victory without retreat, Zelda lifted her wand and said, “Another time.” With that she was gone.

Afterward

Alex went home with only a few scratches, despite the horrific blows she’d suffered. After a few weeks, things returned to normal, although Zelda was not far from anyone’s mind. Alex continued to practice the new sword, ready for next time…

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